

Excerpt: *What Belongs To You* by Garth Greenwell

I looked down at his crotch and then back up, saying *Kolko ti e*, how big are you, the standard phrase, always the first question in the Internet chat rooms I used. Mitko didn't say anything in response, he smiled and stepped into a stall and unbuttoned his fly, and my pretense of hesitation fell away as I realized I would pay whatever price he wanted. I took a step toward him, reaching out as if to claim those goods right away, I've always been a terrible negotiator or haggler, my desire is immediately legible, but Mitko buttoned himself back up, raising a hand to hold me off. I thought it was payment he wanted, but instead he stepped around me, telling me to wait, and returned to the line of porcelain sinks, all of them cracked and stained. Then, with a bodily candor I ascribed to drunkenness but would learn was an inalienable trait, he pulled the long tube of his cock free from his jeans and leaned over the bowl of the sink to wash it, skinning it back and wincing at water that only comes out cold. It was some time before he was satisfied, the first sign of a fastidiousness that would never cease to surprise me, given his poverty and the tenuous circumstances in which he lived.

When he returned I asked his price for the act I wanted, which was ten leva until I unfolded my wallet and found only twenty-leva notes, one of which he eagerly claimed. Really what did it matter, the sums were almost equally meaningless to me; I would have paid twice as much, and twice as much again, which isn't to suggest that I had particularly ample resources, but that his body seemed almost infinitely dear. It was astonishing to me that any number of these soiled bills could make that body available, that after the simplest of exchanges I could reach out for it and find it in my grasp. I placed my hands under the tight shirt he wore, and he gently pushed me back so that he could remove it, undoing each of its buttons and then hanging it carefully on the hook of the stall door behind him. He was thinner than I expected, less defined, and the hair that covered his torso had been shaved to bare stubble, so that for the first time I realized how young he was (I would learn he was twenty-three) as he stood boyish and exposed before me. He motioned me forward again with the exaggerated courage some drunk men assume, which can precede, the thought even in my excitement was never far, equally exaggerated outbursts of rage. Mitko surprised me then by leaning forward unrestrainedly, and though I hadn't done anything to invite such contact it was welcome and I sucked eagerly on his tongue, which was antiseptic with alcohol. I knew he was performing a desire he didn't feel, and really I think he was drunk past the possibility of desire. But then there's something theatrical in all our embraces, I think, as we weight our responses against those we perceive or project; always we desire too much or not enough, and compensate accordingly. I was performing too, pretending to believe that his show of passion was a genuine response to my own desire, about which there was nothing feigned. As if he sensed these thoughts he pressed me more tightly to him, and for the first time I caught, beneath the more powerful and nearly overwhelming smell of alcohol, his own scent, which would be the greatest source of the pleasure I took from him and which I would seek out (at his neck and crotch, beneath his arms) at each of our meetings. It put an end to my thinking, I lifted one of his hands above his head, breaking our kiss to press my face into the pit of his arm (he shaved there too, the skin was rough against my tongue), sucking at his scent as if taking some necessary nourishment at an inadequate source. And then I sank to my knees and took him in my mouth.

-- from pp. 7-9 of *What Belongs To You* by Garth Greenwell, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016.